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A CONCISE:

GUIDE TO MILITARY RESEARCH (SECOND WORLD WAR)

A concise guide to undertaking research into the British Army during the Second World War, and the sources available to researchers.

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www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk – Guide to Military Research

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Guide to Military Research

Before You Begin – Do you have?

- Full Name,
- Date of Birth,
- Royal Navy/Army and Royal Air Force – Ship, Regiment/Corps, Squadron,
- Service Number,
- Ranks held,
- Where and when did he or she serve – any family anecdotes, letters, etc?

The more information you have, the better your chances of success.

What do you wish to find out and why? If you are researching an individual person, what was the extent of their influence and responsibility? The wider this is, the wider your research should be to understand fully their life in their context. What parameters do you have in terms of time and money? It is best to determine an end point for your research. I use a simple project management system to keep myself on track.

Decide on the context you wish to learn about. For example: my great-uncle died at Gallipoli in 1915 while serving with the Herefordshire Regiment, but:

- Why was he serving with the Herefordshire Regiment (as he lived in Gloucestershire)?
- What was it like to be a private in this regiment?
- Where did they serve?
- When did he enlist, and what did his training consist of?
- When did they move overseas?
- Why did the regiment go to Gallipoli?
- What was the context of that campaign?
- How did he die?

What would people have known at the time? We now have the benefit of history, but at the time, what would an individual have known and how would they have interpreted it? You can consider the level of your research by using:

- Political Strategic – War Cabinet & Parliament
- Military Strategic – Chiefs of Staff
- Operational – Corps/Divisions/Brigades
- Tactical – Battalion/Company/Platoon

Take account of different spellings of names, and use of shortened names, alternative forenames, nicknames, or aliases. Likewise, the person may not have given their correct date of birth, or it may have been recorded inaccurately.

The documents of the time were generally handwritten, and mistakes occurred. I expect that the authors of the time had no concept that someone would be interested in what they wrote seventy-five years later.

- Remember Kipling's 5 W – H:
 - Who,
 - What,
 - Where,
 - When,
 - Why,
 - How?

Now You Can Begin

First World War – The Long, Long Trail

My recommendation is to read the section on The Long, Long Trail – Researching A Soldier. In my view, it is the best available and is on-line at:

<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/how-to-research-a-soldier/>

First World War – Western Front Association

Formed in 1980, this association has the aim of furthering interest in The Great War. Its website is found at:

<http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/>

Second World War – British Military History

Please have a look at my website at: www.BritishMilitaryHistory.co.uk

It is not yet as complete as The Long, Long Trail (see above), but is intended to replicate that website for the Second World War from a British perspective.

Ministry of Defence (Veterans UK)

A Soldier's Service Record is the best document that details the service of officers, non-commissioned officers and other ranks of the **British Army**, however, they vary in quality and legibility (almost all were hand written). They commence prior to The Great War, but the building in London in which they were housed was badly damaged by fire after a bombing raid in 1940, and only about 30% of those pre-dating 1940 survived. WO/363 relates to those men who left the Army between 1914 and 1921, and again only between 20 – 30% survive.

Post 1940 service records are more readily available. If the subject is alive, they have to apply for their own records. If the subject is deceased, their next-of-kin can apply, by providing a proof of identification and proof of a close relationship to the deceased person.

For application process, please see:

<https://www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records>

Other information for Veterans of the U.K. Armed Forces can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk>

With regards to post-1945 postings and deployments, please see:

<http://british-army-units1945on.co.uk/>

Non-British Army Personnel

For men and women who served in armed forces other than the British Army, the availability of information varies. For those who served in the Royal Navy or Royal Air Force, applications can be made to the Ministry of Defence as above.

For those who served with the Australian Armed Forces, a very good and informative website is available at:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/>

The Australians (in my humble opinion) lead the field in this respect, as many of the service records are now available, free at the point of use, on the internet. Their policy of digitalisation of relevant service records and other documentation is to be recommended. Information on men who served in the Royal Australian Air Force can be found at:

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/SearchScreens/BasicSearch.aspx>

Canada is just as advanced as Australia, with an excellent website at:

<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/second-world-war/Pages/introduction.aspx>

Again, there is a wealth of information available already, and a farsighted policy of digitalisation of records. A useful index can be accessed via Ancestry at:

<https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=9145>

New Zealand equals Australia and Canada. Their main website is at:

<http://archives.govt.nz/research/guides/war>

For service personnel, the link is:

<http://www.nzdf.mil.nz/personnel-records/nzdf-archives/>

Sadly, when researching men or women who served in other related armed forces, such as the British Indian Army, or the West and East African elements of the British Army, information is more difficult to obtain. Most of the records of men who served in the British Indian Army were retained at the Regimental Centres when British India partitioned in August 1947. They are, therefore, to be found in modern day Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Individual Regimental Centres are very keen to help if they can, but locating an individual person is very difficult.

Some of the records of British officers in the British Indian Army can be found at the British Library in London (see below). A useful source can be The Families in British India Society, at:

<https://www.fibis.org/>

Information about African service personnel of the British Army is very scant, in part a legacy of the lack of information recorded when a man 'signed up' for the British Army. Those who died are recorded on the C.W.G.C. website (see below), but otherwise information is difficult to source.

The Royal West African Frontier Force Association publishes a journal twice yearly. There are some books about both the King's African Rifles and the Royal West African Frontier Force.

The National Archives

For British historians, this must be the starting place. The National Archives are located at Kew in South-West London. To view documents, you must obtain a Readers Ticket, and going to Kew is the best option. Asking for documents to be printed is expensive. If you cannot get to Kew, there are some people who will copy documents for you for a fee, which is for you to arrange. There is a policy of placing some material on-line, with several War Diaries from the First World War, and R.A.F. Operations Record Books for most squadrons are available.

There is a good on-line facility to search for material and information at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

A Research Guide covering the Royal Navy can be found at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/second-world-war/>

A Research Guide regarding the British Army in the Second World War can be found at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-operations-second-world-war/>

A similar guide applying post-war can be found at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-operations-after-1945/>

For the Royal Air Force, a guide to squadrons is available at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/royal-air-force-squadron/>

And for R.A.F. personnel at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/royal-air-force-personnel/>

Some businesses have worked in collaboration with the National Archives to make available on-line some groups of records regarding service personnel. These are regularly being added to, but some of those available include:

Soldiers' Records (1914-1920)

Military records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks are available from the National Archives, or by subscription at: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

These include service records (WO 363) and pension records (WO 364), and cover regular soldiers who may have enlisted as early as 1892 for 22 years' service.

Household Cavalry service records (1799-1920)

WO/400 contains service records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks that served in the Household Cavalry regiments (Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards)

Medal Cards (1914 – 1920)

WO/372 is the collection of the First World War Army medal cards in respect of a soldier who received a gallantry medal and/or campaign medal. Information is often limited to what medals a soldier was entitled to and when they were awarded.

Silver War Badge rolls (1914-1920)

A Silver War Badge was issued to all personnel discharged after service in the Great War due to wounds or illness. These are available on: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

Recommendations for Military Honours and Awards (1935 – 1990)

WO/373 contains recommendations or citations for military honours and awards. Most of these have been digitalised and can be downloaded on-line for a fee.

Additional information is available at the National Archives at Kew. These include Campaign Medal Rolls, Pension Case Files (only a few exist).

For those records available on-line, there is a charge currently of £3.30 to download.

Brigade of Guards

The regiments of the Brigade of Guards: Household Cavalry, Grenadier Guards, Coldstream Guards, Scots Guards, Irish Guards and Welsh Guards, maintain their own records which are held by the regiments concerned. Contact them in writing:

The Regimental Archivist of the (Insert Appropriate Regiment) Guards,
Wellington Barracks,
Birdcage Walk,
LONDON. SW1E 6HQ

They will send you a form to complete and require payment for a search of and supply of appropriate service records.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (C.W.G.C.)

Established shortly after the Great War to manage and maintain the British War Cemeteries, the C.W.G.C. updated its website recently. They cover the two World Wars, only. Their website at: <http://www.cwgc.org/>

This website lists the war dead, no matter how or where they died. Therefore, the list includes those who died of natural causes, illness, and accidents, as well as those killed in action.

The London Gazette

This site contains commissions and promotions of officers of the British and British Indian Army, and most citations for gallantry medals. Searches need to explore variations, such as JohnLawrence Maxwell and John Lawrence Maxwell. Use “ at both ends to enable specific searches. The address of the website is:

<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/all-notice>

National Library of Scotland

The Library has digitalised several Navy, Army and Air Force Lists, see:

<http://digital.nls.uk/british-military-lists/pageturner.cfm?id=97343435>

Imperial War Museum

The main museum is located in South London, please see:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

The Imperial War Museum now encompasses other locations, including:

The Churchill War Rooms – <https://www.iwm.org.uk/visits/churchill-war-rooms>

H.M.S. Belfast – <https://www.iwm.org.uk/visits/hms-belfast>

I.W.M. North at Manchester – <https://www.iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-north>

I.W.M. Duxford – <https://www.iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-duxford>

The National Museum of the Royal Navy

A recent innovation is the formation of an umbrella organisation for:

H.M.S Victory at Portsmouth,

Royal Navy Museum at Portsmouth,

Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton,

Royal Navy Submarine Museum at Gosport,

Royal Marines Museum at Southsea,

Explosion, the Museum of Naval Firepower at Gosport.

Details of all six museums can be found at:

<http://www.nmrn.org.uk/>

National Army Museum

The museum, based in Chelsea, London, has a useful website at:

<http://www.nam.ac.uk/>

Army Museums

Details of Army museums across the United Kingdom can be found at:

<http://www.armymuseums.org.uk/>

The Army Museums Ogilvy Trust administers this site. It is the only national organisation that represents, supports, and promotes the regimental and corps museums of the British Army. As an independent private charity, it relies entirely on its own resources and the generosity of others to fund its work. A selection of museums includes:

Royal Artillery: <https://royalartillerymuseum.com/>

Royal Engineers: <http://www.re-museum.co.uk/>

Royal Signals: <http://www.royalsignalsmuseum.co.uk/>

I have to mention the Kohima Museum in York, as it is the only museum in the U.K. focusing on a specific battle and campaign; see:

<http://www.kohimamuseum.co.uk/>

R.A.F. Museum

The R.A.F. Museum has two locations, one in London and the other at Cosford in Shropshire. The R.A.F. Museum holds First World War Royal Flying Corps casualty cards in the Department of Research. If anyone is researching Second World War R.A.F. relatives or former Cranwell Flight Cadets, the museum has the Flight Cadet records from 1920 to 1975. R.A.F. Records of Service can be obtained from R.A.F. Disclosures at Cranwell. However, the serviceman/woman themselves must ask for the record if they are alive. If deceased, relatives can request the record with proof that they are the surviving next of kin, and upon payment of a fee of £30.

For further information see:

<http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/>

The British Library

The British Library is located at St. Pancras in London. It contains the records of the former India Office, including the service records of some British officers who served in the British Indian Army in the L/MIL/14 series and some orders of battle for India and South-East Asia. See:

<http://www.bl.uk/>

Commercial Family History websites

Several commercial websites offer information and services in relation to family and military history. They require some form of payment and subscription in order to be able to access the information they have available. These companies either purchase or obtain by some method various databases, sometimes in conjunction with the National Archives, which they make available to clients.

Please note: I offer no endorsement for any of the websites listed below. A decision to sign up to any subscription is at your own risk. The list of databases was current as of 1 October 2014 – but will change so you must check yourself to see if that database is still provided or if additional ones have been added.

Ancestry – www.Ancestry.co.uk

This site has some of the digitised collections available in partnership with the National Archives, including:

1. British Army Service Records 1914 – 1920 (WO363),
2. British Army Pension Records 1914 – 1920,
3. British Army First World War Medal Index Cards 1914 – 1920,
4. U.K. Silver War Badges Records 1914 – 1920,
5. U.K. Naval Medal and Award Rolls 1793 – 1972,
6. U.K. Naval Officer and Rating Service Records 1802 – 1919,

Other databases include:

1. U.K. Naval Officers Service Records Card and Files Index 1880's – 1950's,
2. U.K. Royal Naval Division Service Records Index 1914 – 1919,
3. U.K. Royal Naval Division Casualties 1914 – 1924,
4. U.K. Royal Naval Reserve Service Records Index 1860 – 1955,
5. U.K. Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Service Records Index 1903 – 1922,
6. U.K. Royal Marines Registers of Service 1842 – 1925,
7. U.K. Campaign Medals Awarded to Merchant Seamen 1914 – 1925,
8. U.K. Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914 – 1919,
9. England, The National Roll of Honour 1914 – 1918,
10. U.K. De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914 – 1919,
11. U.K. Outward Passenger List 1890 – 1960.

Ancestry also offer a service called their 'family tree resource. This can be found at:

<http://trees.ancestry.co.uk/>

Find My Past – <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

1. British Army Service Records 1914 – 1920 (WO/363),
2. British Army First World War Medal Index Cards 1914 – 1920,
3. U.K. Silver War Badges Records 1914 – 1920,
4. Royal Navy 1914 Star Medal Rolls 1914 – 1920,
5. Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Medal Rolls 1914 – 1920,
6. Royal Marine Medal Roll 1914 – 1920,
7. Royal Navy Seaman Service Records 1899 – 1919,
8. Royal Navy Officers Service Records 1899 – 1919,
9. Royal Marines Service Records 1899 – 1919,
10. Royal Naval Division Service Records 1914 – 1920,
11. First World War Ships Lost at Sea 1914 – 1919,
12. Royal Air Force Airman's Service Records 1912 – 1939,
13. Royal Air Force Officers' Service Records 1912 – 1920,
14. Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914 – 1919,
15. The National Roll of the Great War 1914 – 1918,
16. U.K. De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914 – 1919,
17. Plymouth Rolls of Honour 1914 – 1919,
18. Some Medal Citations from the Great War,
19. Royal Air Force Muster Roll 1918,
20. Military Nurses 1856 – 1994,
21. Military Nurses – Red Cross Register,
22. British Officers Taken Prisoner of War 1914 – 1918.

Plus, other databases such as some baptism, marriage and burial registers and census records.

Genes Reunited – <http://www.genesreunited.co.uk/>

Check the website for current information available.

The Genealogist – <http://www.thegenealogist.co.uk>

Check the website for current information available.

Family History Associations

It is worth checking to see if you have a local history group or family history group. They can offer effective support and encouragement. As an example, please see:

<http://www.devonfhs.org.uk/links.htm>

Other Sources

There are varieties of other sources that may assist your research. These include:

- War Memorials,
- Parish Records,
- Published Parish Histories,
- Newspaper Articles,
- Local Reference Libraries or Heritage Centres – Use them or lose them,
- School Rolls,
- Regimental/Divisional Histories,
- War Diaries (now available on-line for Great War at National Archives),
- Personal Diaries,
- Forums and Websites – BE CAREFUL check efficacy and provenance.

Wikipedia is a common source of information. It can be useful, but the standard of entries is variable. My suggestion is to check the View History tab to see who edited the entry and when, and check the sources used.

There is a large range of books on various aspects of military history, indeed, in the U.K. there are sections on military history in most bookshops, which few other countries have. Care needs to be exercised as the quality of books does vary, but as always, buyer beware. In respect of books, there are many out there, so check for any book reviews. Who wrote the book and why? What sources did they use: primary or secondary? As an indication of the range of books available, and reviews of some books, please see:

<https://www.librarything.com/catalog/RobPALMER>

In terms of books, the obvious place to start is

<http://www.amazon.co.uk>

In addition, consider

<http://www.abebooks.co.uk/>

Two recommended booksellers that have a range of military books are:

<http://www.naval-military-press.com/>

<http://www.pen-and-sword.co.uk/>

There are others.

Use local resources. An example of what local advice may be available, please see Devon Heritage Services at:

http://www.devon.gov.uk/record_office.htm

Local newspapers can be a useful source of information and are often held at your local library.

Conclusion

Before

- How much information do you have to start with?
- Is it sufficient to begin reasonable research?
- What do you want to find out and why?
- How much time and money do you have available?

During

- Do not assume – if you don't know, say so.
- Do not assume a fact is correct as stated, check and check again.
- If you find contradictory statements, explain that openly.
- Check the provenance of websites.
- Compare different sources – Check & Confirm.
- Corroboration strengthens evidence.
- Use primary sources where possible.
- With secondary sources – view the Bibliography.
- Handwritten documents may be difficult to read.
- You will not find everything you want to.
- Some conflicts will not be resolved (at least with reasonable effort).

After

- What are you going to do with your finished product?
- If you intend to publish, who is your intended market?
- Who else may be interested?
- Remember what you find interesting others may not.
- It is great fun.
- It can be frustrating, time consuming and expensive if you let it.
- Often one thing leads to another and the need to find out more.
- However, it can be very rewarding.
- You will learn more and be better informed.
- Understanding our history is important to who we are today.

Good luck!